

Does National Standards reporting help parents *to understand their children's learning?*

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KEY POINTS

- National Standards (NS) reporting must include details about current achievement and areas of need as well as future priorities for learning.
- NS reporting must empower parents to provide enriching learning opportunities, which will support and consolidate student motivation to write.
- To aid parental understanding more attention needs to be paid to reporting using plain language.
- Given that parents play a significant role in the nurturing of positive attitudes, attitudinal information needs to become a compulsory aspect of NS reporting.
- A written report is insufficient on its own to explain to parents the nature and scope of a child's learning in writing and how they may support that learning.
- Together, written reports and parent interviews provide the best opportunity for a productive learning relationship to be forged between home and school.

Does National Standards written reporting fully inform parents of their child's achievements and thus better place them to support their child's learning? Using the reporting of progress and achievement in writing, and the perceptions of eight parents, the current study pays particular attention to the nature, scope, and complexity of the information communicated to parents in written reports, and their understandings of this information. Questions are raised regarding whether and how National Standards reporting is meeting the remit of establishing a learning-focused relationship between home and school. Suggestions are made about how schools can evoke parental support of school learning by using a broader range of information, communicated in language that is accessible to parents.

National Standards reporting

Since 2010 schools have been obliged to report to parents twice yearly in writing about students' achievement in relation to National Standards (NS) in reading, writing and mathematics (Ministry of Education, 2010a). Schools also have the freedom to report other achievement and learning information to parents. Schools can, for example report on learning in other curriculum areas, progress towards the key competencies as outlined in *The New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007) (NZC) and students' attitudes towards learning. While schools often offer parents face-to-face opportunities to discuss students' progress and achievement, this is not a mandated requirement. Significantly, parental submissions made as part of the NS consultation process emphasised the need for accurate and honest reporting of achievement using reporting formats, points of reference, and language that will foster understanding and involvement.

Given it is now 5 years since the implementation of NS, it seemed timely to investigate parents' perceptions of the usefulness of NS reporting with reference to understanding their child's achievement, and how such reporting facilitates parental involvement in and support of school learning. Although the current project focused on the three areas of NS reporting, reporting achievement and learning in writing is used here as a case study.¹ Using writing exemplifies the nature of the information provided to parents, parental understanding of this information, and its usefulness in helping them to support their child's learning in writing. It also functions as a catalyst to discuss the type of support parents can reasonably be expected to provide.

The Ministry of Education (2009b) describe NS statements as:

reference points or signposts that describe the achievement in reading, writing and mathematics, that will enable students to meet the demands of the New Zealand Curriculum. They will help teachers make judgements about their students' progress so that the students and their teachers, parents, families and whānau can agree on the next learning goals. (p. 4)

By nature, NS are broad descriptions of attainment and, in the case of writing, they make reference to another nationally recognised scale used to describe student achievement—an NZC level. However, as the eight curriculum levels span Years 1 to 13 it is expected that progress through a curriculum level will take about 2 years—this is an important point to convey to parents so they can fully understand the nature and rate of their child's progress and achievement.

Supporting learning in writing

Writing is a complex cognitive activity, and it is socially, culturally, and contextually framed. Critical to student success is the understanding, acquisition and application of bodies of knowledge pertaining to writing's deep and surface features. Furthermore, students must have a sound understanding how texts and language structures work for a range of purposes and audiences (Parr, 2013). Arguably of equal importance is the formation of favourable attitudes towards writing (Petrić, 2002) as motivation to write is a lynchpin for success (Lo & Hyland, 2007). It is therefore crucial that from an early age students develop an interest in writing and writers, view writing as a pleasurable, valuable, and rewarding experience,

and have confidence in their ability to write for specific purposes and audiences.

Albeit with a focus on reading, research has shown that parents convey implicit messages to their children regarding the importance of literacy to school success (Baker, 2003; Weigel, Martin & Bennett, 2006). It is also known that home-based experiences have enduring positive or negative effects on children and their literacy learning. To ensure positive effects, parental aspirations and expectations should be at a level commensurate with a child's age, or level of ability, or both, and be accompanied by appropriate levels of support and interest. However, such support and interest will be mediated by parental beliefs about language and literacy development as well as their personal levels of literacy. Typically, parents with high levels of literacy promote a more flexible and holistic approach to literacy learning with an emphasis on engagement and enjoyment. In comparison, parents with lower levels of literacy tend to endorse and reinforce learning through rote and repetition, with an overemphasis on the correction of errors (Deforges, & Abouchaar, 2003).

Given the significant impact parental practices can have on children's literacy learning it is vital that schools provide parents with appropriate advice and support in relation to how best to support in-school literacy learning. To this end reporting student achievement has an integral role to play as it can provide the necessary connection between school and home practices. In the first instance parents must be provided with clear, easily understood information, which includes details about current achievement and areas of need as well as future priorities for learning (Absolum, Flockton, Hattie, Hipkins & Reid, 2009) so that parental expectations and aspirations are set at an appropriate level. Secondly, reporting must empower parents to provide enriching learning opportunities which will support and consolidate student engagement in and motivation to write.

The research design

The current qualitative study attempted to gain insight into the subjective understandings that parents bring to the reporting process. The research questions guiding the study were as follows.

- What achievement information is communicated to parents in a formal written report?
- What understandings do parents have regarding their child's achievement and progress as communicated to them through the formal written report?

While purposive sampling was the preferred sampling strategy, a lack of volunteers from parents in selected

schools resulted in a convenience sampling approach being used. After gaining access to a large, private-sector organisation, an advertisement outlining the nature and scope of the research was circulated to staff working in one department. As a consequence, eight staff, each of which had at least one primary school-aged child volunteered to participate in the study. Although the sample was one of convenience, the schools the participants' children attended reflected a range of decile ratings (1, 2, 3, 6 and 10) and included three full primary schools (Years 1–8) and five contributing schools (Years 1–6). Participants' children's current year level ranged from Year 1 through to Year 6.

Data gathered from two sources comprised the dataset for what is reported here. The first data source was an individual semistructured interview held with each of the eight parents. With permission, all interviews were audiotaped and transcribed and sent to parents for verification, or amendment, or both. Given the research focus, the interview schedule tapped into parental understandings of the normative and narrative information provided within a NS report. In addition, questions ascertained perceptions of the usefulness of normative and narrative information in helping them to support their child's learning. The second data source was the current NS written report received by each of the eight participants. Given the timing of data collection each parent brought along their child's interim report. The collection and subsequent analysis of these documents was seen as critical for several reasons. First they served as an aide memoire for parents during the interview, prompting the parents to recall and explain the details about their child's progress and achievement. Secondly, the NS reports provided an accurate snapshot of the nature and scope of the information provided to parents at a given point in time. As part of ethics approval, parental consent and student assent were gained to access and use the information contained within the school reports. Parental consent was also gained in regard to wider student participation in the study.

Ezzy (2002) has argued that an eclectic approach to qualitative analysis results in a stronger, more robust interpretation of data. In the current study two overarching approaches to data analysis were used. Use of the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) facilitated the identification of predominant themes within the interviews. A content analysis of reporting formats resulted in the identification of key content areas, including the normative points of reference used and the nature of the language used when reporting narratively.

Writing: A case study of parental understanding of the information provided in NS reporting

As required, all eight schools reported writing achievement using the “above” and “at” scale points albeit with some minor variations of terminology, with several schools adding the word “expectations”. However, only two of the eight schools followed the Ministry of Education’s advice regarding the use of the below or well-below scale point in their interim reports. As recommended these two schools informed parents that their child was “working towards the standard” or “with accelerated progress could meet the national standard”.

To supplement the NS information provided to parents, five schools chose to use national curriculum levels as an additional point of reference to report achievement in writing. Given that a curriculum level spans a broad spectrum of achievement, four of the five schools tried to provide parents with more detailed information regarding where a child might “sit” within a level. However there was no consistency across schools in the descriptors used to indicate such placement. Three of the schools used a three-point scale. One school used the descriptors B (beginning), M (middle), E (end) with no further explanation given to parents. The other two schools used the e-AsTTle related codes of B, P, and A. Neither of these schools included a key on their report forms to indicate that B referred to achieving at a basic level, P to achieving at proficient level and A for advanced level achievement. The remaining two schools used a two-point scale. They divided curriculum level achievement into two sub-sections: early and late. For example, a student could be judged as achieving early level 1 or late level 3.

In addition to reporting against NS and curriculum levels two schools also reported a student’s spelling age. Parents who received information about the spelling age felt it was the most readily understood point of reference as it provided a benchmark they had some familiarity with and thus helped them interpret the NS information. What did not seem clear to parents was that ability to spell as indicated by a spelling age is only one small isolated component of writing capability.

Overall, all parents in this study felt that schools’ use of NS levels provided them with a fairly positive, albeit generalised picture of their child’s current achievement in writing. This was despite the fact that in two instances children were working below the national standard. Seemingly the schools’ use of positive language (working towards / with accelerated progress) to convey performance that was below the specified standard not

only softened the blow of reporting performance that was below expectation, but such language provided parents with information that led to an inaccurate interpretation.

From the perspective of the parents, the two main points of reference used to report achievement in writing failed to provide them with information that was either easily understood or helpful. Although aware that schools were required to report against NS, parents had little understanding of how NS had been derived or what this particular point of comparison meant. They equated the “at” “above” “below” or “well below” judgements with their child being above average, average, or below average. Despite some schools providing additional tabulated information showing the relationship between year level and curriculum level, most parents were unclear what a curriculum level was and how it fitted with the NS. Parents seemed to have little clear understanding regarding what meeting or exceeding the standard looked like at, for example, level 2 writing. This is hardly surprising given they had little familiarity with or understanding of the knowledge and skills encapsulated in a particular curriculum level.

Although parents appreciated “knowing” where their child sat in relation to a standard or a curriculum level, they sought a level of detail not provided in most of the written reports. A number of parents expressed a desire for more information regarding the skills and competencies their child had mastered. While all schools provided parents with narrative commentaries to explain writing achievement, these commentaries were not easy to understand given teachers’ use of technical language associated with writing, for example:

“He understands that we write recounts to retell an event and he is using appropriate text features when he writes recounts e.g. orientation, sequence of events in order.”

“... using connectives and specific language features to interest the audience.”

Parents also felt it important for areas of difficulty to be identified but these were not included in the narratives. However, with one exception, all schools included a “next learning steps” section in the report, fulfilling parental expectations that future priorities for learning would be identified. Unfortunately, in most cases, the technical language used in a number of these narratives also made them difficult for parents to understand:

“To develop understanding of literal and figurative language using the context of the text ...”

“... continue to add detail to all written work and enhance with interesting adjectives, similes and metaphors.”

Parents highlighted the need for parent–teacher interviews to aid understanding of the written reports, particularly the narrative comments. With one exception,

all parents in this study took the opportunity to attend a parent–teacher interview offered by the school. In doing so they appreciated that the parent–teacher interview was the venue whereby teachers could explain detail contained within the written report that was hard to comprehend. Even then, as several parents explained, without the provision of real examples to illustrate specific details they struggled to understand what had been achieved, what areas needed to be worked on, and how they might provide assistance.

All parents in the current study made reference to the importance of helping their child at home and displayed a willingness to offer such assistance. To this end parents considered sections in a report such as “how to help” to be important in the consolidation of their child’s learning. At the same time, it was acknowledged that they might not have the requisite knowledge or knowledge of the “right” strategy to use to support writing development at home. Parents therefore wanted and appreciated clear, specific guidance as to ways in which they could help their child. Unfortunately in this study only three schools provided specific suggestions for parents in regard to how they might help their child consolidate in-school learning about writing. The focus of these suggestions was on the tasks a child might complete at home such as “retelling ... a story using a variety of sequence words as sentence starters and descriptive language”. There were no suggestions however about the approach a parent might take to support their child to carry out such a task in an authentic and enjoyable way.

While it is not mandatory for schools to assess and report on effort or attitude towards writing, three schools provided parents with short comments about these factors. The use of terms such as “developing”, “strength” or “excellent” in relation to effort and/or attitude resulted in parents receiving a very general picture of the energy expended or a child’s feelings towards writing. The limited amount of information received by parents about children’s attitudes towards learning in specific school subjects such as writing was a cause of concern for the majority of those interviewed with several noting that one way in which they felt they could support in-school learning was through the reinforcement of positive attitudes.

NS reporting—a learning relationship between home and school is yet to be established

According to Kofoed (2009), reporting to parents fulfils a hierarchy of purposes. At the lowest level, it provides parents with information about current achievement as

well as progress over time. At the highest level, reporting fulfils the remit of establishing a learning relationship between home and school. Earlier research conducted in New Zealand revealed willingness on the part of both teachers and parents to engage in a learning-focused relationship to enhance children’s learning (McDowall & Boyd, 2005). Without such willingness it would be impossible to achieve the stated intention of NS, which is to establish a productive relationship between home and school with the intent of improving literacy and numeracy achievement.

At the heart of an effective and productive learning relationship is the child and her learning, with parents empowered to provide the necessary support to reinforce school learning (Goodall & Montgomery, 2013). However, as others have argued (Hattie, 2010; Kofoed, 2009), an effective and productive learning-focused relationship is dependent on the nature and quality of the information provided and the accessibility of this information to parents. For information to be useful, recipients must be able to gain meaning from what is written. To this end, a requirement of NS standards reporting is that reports be written in plain language (Ministry of Education, 2010b). In light of a recent analysis commissioned by the Ministry of Education, not surprisingly given the lack of guidance given to schools, this requirement seems to have been challenging for some schools. As Ward and Thomas (2013) noted 57 percent of the school reports sampled were rated as unclear in relation to the use of plain language to describe progress and achievement. In a similar vein it can be argued that the information provided to parents in this study regarding learning and achievement in writing did not fulfil the plain-language requirement either. Reporting against the writing NS had little meaning for parents and hence did not facilitate productive involvement in their child’s learning. A comparative assessment against a curriculum level also failed to provide either useful or meaningful information about children’s language capabilities or needs. Whilst it is acknowledged that not all parents seek the same level of involvement in their child’s education and learning, those who wish to be involved in productive ways should not be prevented from doing so because of shortcomings in the nature of information they receive. Recognising that schools have had little guidance in regard to reporting NS information to parents, more recently the Te Kete Ipurangi (TKI) website has provided a range of “best practice” exemplars to support reporting practice. Also available to schools is a range of reporting formats developed by the Ministry of Education, which can be amended to suit a school community (Ministry of Education, 2012).

New Zealand research conducted prior to NS reporting (Taylor, 2004) found that from parents’

perceptions the most helpful information they received was related to how they could support school learning at home. In the current study it can be assumed that narrative sections within school reports such as “next steps” and / or “how to help” were included with the intention of providing parents with personal, individualised information. If framed in plain language, such narratives had the potential to supplement comparative information presented through the NS and curriculum levels. Theoretically these commentaries could have helped to facilitate a productive home–school relationship focused on a child’s learning. Like their counterparts in Taylor’s study, parents in this study voiced a commitment and willingness to support their child’s learning but in doing so they acknowledged their dependence on the school to help them fulfil this role. Critically, as has been shown in the past (Hattie & Peddie, 2003; McNaughton, Parr, Timperley & Robinson, 1992), teachers’ narratives failed to support parental understanding of their children’s learning in writing or to provide the necessary guidance and advice to parents that could have helped them provide focused and supported help at home. Despite the implementation of NS reporting, results from this study suggest that the gap between what schools provide and what parents want is yet to be bridged. Significantly, without appropriate and meaningful teacher guidance and support a learning-focused relationship between home and school is not achievable.

As Parr (2013) has argued, to support development in writing requires a specialist body of content and pedagogical content knowledge beyond that held by the “average” writer. It is therefore unlikely that a majority of parents will have this requisite knowledge. How then can they be involved in a productive learning relationship focused on their child’s learning in writing? What role can they play and how can schools best help them to fulfil their role through the provision of advice and guidance? One of the key ways in which parents can support learning in writing is through the development and reinforcement of favourable attitudes towards writing so that students realise competence in writing is a desirable outcome to achieve across a range of subjects. While parents in the current study wanted information regarding their child’s attitudes, in the main this information was absent from the written report, and if it was included it was superficial in nature and scope. Currently NS reporting has no requirement to report on students’ attitudes toward learning, either in the NS curriculum areas or wider. Such an omission seems significant in light of the crucial role that parents play in the development of attitudes towards literacy (Baker,

2003) and to other subjects also. To this end, to fulfil the aim of involving parents in a productive learning relationship, schools need to provide easily accessible information in regard to a child’s attitudes towards writing as well as guidance and advice related to how positive attitudes can be developed and sustained over time.

Significantly attitudes are formed as a result of writing experiences with the nature of those experiences impacting positively or negatively on engagement and motivation (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003; Goodall & Montgomery, 2013). Hence the development of favourable attitudes is more complex than parents simply providing support. Home experiences must be enjoyable and rewarding and appropriate to the child’s level of capability thus nurturing a sense of confidence and competency in the child. Given that research has shown an overly didactic approach to supporting literacy learning can create an unpleasant and unrewarding experience for students (Mackenzie, Hemmings & Kay, 2011), it is crucial that parental support does not utilise such an approach. In the case of writing, parents need to understand that accuracy has its place, but the correction of errors should not be emphasised to the detriment of other aspects such as creativity. They also need more guidance than currently given in relation to the approaches and strategies that engage and motivate writers. Such advice should form part of the information given within the “how to help” section of the report with an emphasis on the need for home experiences that are fun rather than laborious, and authentic rather than fabricated.

A final comment: A way forward to supporting parental understanding of progress and achievement in writing

The current study is small-scale in nature, and thus the findings must be treated cautiously given the limitations of the sample and its size. It does, however, provide a tale that warrants some attention. Success in writing is not solely dependent on the acquisition of knowledge and skills. Equally important is the motivation to write. However, NS reports do not give equal treatment to these factors. Seemingly at this point in time there is an overemphasis in NS reporting on reporting writing achievement as it pertains to writing knowledge and skills. This lack of attention to reporting attitudes toward writing can be regarded as a shortcoming of present mandatory reporting requirements. Given the significant role parents play in the nurturing of positive attitudes,

attitudinal information needs to become part of NS reporting, as does the inclusion of information about the approaches and practices that help to maintain and reinforce favourable attitudes towards a subject such as writing. As with all reporting, such information should be communicated in plain language to aid parental understanding and involvement.

While it is known that schools use a variety of approaches to sharing information with parents about how best to support literacy learning, parents' preferred means of gaining such information is through a combination of written reports and parent interviews (McDowall & Boyd, 2005). Yet current legislation enforced through NAG2a (Ministry of Education, 2010a) over-emphasises the role of written reporting and underplays the role of oral forms of communication in aiding parental understanding, in that written reporting is mandatory and oral reporting is optional. It can be argued that neither written nor oral forms of reporting are sufficient on their own. One complements the other and together they provide the foundation for a productive learning-focused relationship between home and school. In the first instance, written reports framed in plain language provide a permanent point of reference for ongoing parental consideration. Secondly, the detail contained within these reports can provide the basis for a two- or three-way dialogue focused on achievement, areas of need, and ways to help. In turn, the use of and discussion about a child's work during an interview can illustrate a student's writing strengths and weaknesses in a personalised, authentic, and meaningful manner. Furthermore, the inclusion of a parental voice (and student's voice) in these conversations can provide teachers with insights into aspects of a student's learning not necessarily evident in the school context. Therefore to support a learning-focused relationship between home and school both reporting practices should become mandatory. Continuing professional development for schools in framing reports in plain language is also a necessity.

Note

- 1 Data were collected during 2013 from the eight parent participants who lived in the Greater Auckland area. At the time of data collection parents had recently received an interim NS report and this report formed the basis of discussion during the semistructured interviews and subsequent analysis of reporting formats and the information contained within them.

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